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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to present some results of a pilot study designed to find out the extent to which English words and expressions are already familiar to Swedish-speaking children before they start studying English at school, that is, at the end of their fourth school year. The study drew data from a simple productive and receptive English skills test administered to 74 pupils at that level in four Swedish-language schools in Finland. A relatively good knowledge of English vocabulary was found, especially in instances of similarity between English and Swedish forms. On the receptive (listening comprehension) portion of the test, the average of correctly identified words was 52 percent, and for expressions it was 58 percent, with recognition being best for words referring to family, pets, parts of the body, and colors. On the productive test, in which students were asked to write as many English words as possible and their Swedish equivalents in 20 minutes, the pupils produced 246 different words, with 25 percent of those occurring in more than two pupils' lists and referring to aspects of everyday life, such as numerals, colors, animals, and days of the week. It is recommended that teachers of English to Swedish-speakers take advantage of the linguistic similarities to facilitate comprehension. (MSE)

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Rolf Palmberg

HOW MUCH ENGLISH VOCABULARY DO SWEDISH-SPEAKING PRIMARY-SCHOOL PUPILS KNOW BEFORE STARTING TO LEARN ENGLISH AT SCHOOL?[1]

Introduction and aim

Finland has two official languages, Finnish and Swedish, which are spoken as mother tongues by 94 and 6 per cent of the population respectively. The two languages are unrelated to one another insofar as Finnish is a Finno-Ugric and Swedish an Indo-European language. Apart from the language programmes, there are basically no differences in the educational systems of the two language groups. Thus, in schools where Finnish is the language of instruction, the pupils may choose whether they want to take Swedish or English as their first non-native language. However, in schools where Swedish is the language of instruction, Finnish, as a rule, is the first and English the second non-native language taught.[2] As s result, the vast majority of Swedish-speaking children get their first formal lessons in English when they enter the fifth form at school at the age of eleven.

The aim of this paper is to present some results of a pilot study designed to find out the extent to which English words and expressions are already familiar to Swedish-speaking children before they start studying English at school, i.e. at the very end of their fourth school year.[3]

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Material and method

A test concentrating on both receptive and productive skills was administered to 74 pupils leaving the fourth form in four different primary schools

(with Swedish as the language of instruction) in western and southern Finland, i.e. the main Swedish-speaking areas. Rural as well as urban schools were chosen. Of the 74 pupils 35 were girls and 39 boys. 27 pupils (14 girls and 13 boys) came from bilingual (Swedish+Finnish) homes.

The receptive part of the test (test time: 20 minutes) was of a listening-comprehension type, requesting the pupils to write down the Swedish equivalents of 40 English words and 14 expressions recorded on tape in random order by a native speaker of English. Most of the words and expressions were selected from a vocabulary list containing 1100 words which, according to the recommendations made by the Finnish National Board of General Education *(Engelska* 1978), constitutes the minimal basic vocabulary to be actively known by pupils leaving comprehensive school at the age of sixteen. The written forms of the words were not available to the pupils.

In the productive part of the test the pupils were asked to write down as many English words as possible that they know (other than those included in the receptive part of the test), and their Swedish equivalents. The test time was limited to 20 minutes, and it was pointed out to the pupils that no attention would be paid to spelling mistakes in either language.

Test results and discussion

TABLE 1 lists the 40 English words included in the receptive test. They are listed in order of correct identification by the pupils, i.e. according to their solution percentages.[4] The numbers within parentheses indicate the order in which the words appeared in the tape recording.

TABLE 2 correspondingly lists the 14 English expressions to be identified by the pupils.

As the solution percentages in TABLEs 1 and 2 indicate, the pupils' receptive knowledge of English vocabulary was fairly good. Ranging from 4 to 100, the average solution percentage for correctly identified words was 52. The percentages for correctly identified expressions ranged from 20 to 100, producing an average of 58 per cent. In general, the pupils tended especially to recognize everyday words referring to family, pets, parts of the body, and colours.

TABLE 1. Words included in the receptive test.

	Number of pupils identifying word correctly	Solution percentage	Similarity in pronunciation between English word and its Swedish equivalent
1. sister (35)	74	100	E
2. hand (26)	70	95	E
3. cat (4)	66	89	E
4. dog (39)	63	85	
5. school (9)	61	82	E
father(29)	61	82	E
7. mother (7)	60	81	(E)
policeman (34)	60	81	E
blue (36)	60	81	E
10. love (3)	59	80	
boy (6)	59	80	
12. girl (1)	57	77	
house (10)	57	77	E
dance (38)	57	77	E
15. room (15)	51	69	E
16. drink (16)	49	66	E
17. brother (23)	48	65	(E)
18. name (2)	42	57	
19. snow (14)	39	53	(E)
20. foot (18)	37	50	E
sleep (31)	37	50	
22. right/write (30)	36	49	
23. white (21)	35	47	
eat (22)	35	47	
25. kiss (32)	34	46	
26. hate (17)	28	38	
27. address (25)	27	37	E
28. green (13)	26	35	(E)
29. say (19)	22	30	E
30. car (20)	19	26	
31. bus (24)	18	24	(E)
kill (27)	18	24	
33. pop (40)	15	20	
34. shoot (5)	14	19	E
bike (33)	14	19	
36. left (8)	13	18	
37. gun (11)	8	11	
stand (28)	8	11	
39. bad (12)	7	10	
40. read (37)	3	4	

TABLE 2. Expressions included in the receptive test.

	Number of pupils identifying expression correctly	Solution percentage	Similarity in pronunciation between English expression and its Swedish equivalent
1. good night (10)	74	100	E
2. hands up (5)	67	91	
3. good morning (1)	66	89	E
4. I am sorry (2)	63	85	
5. happy birthday (9)	62	82	
6. merry christmas (3)	53	72	
my name is... (7)	53	72	
8. I like you (4)	47	63	
9. happy new year (11)	25	34	
10. where am I? (14)	24	32	
11. where can I find...? (13)	20	27	
12. how are you? (6)	16	22	
the end (8)	16	22	
14. what day is it? (12)	15	20	

Although the purpose of the test was to give preliminary information about how large English vocabularies Swedish-speaking primary-school pupils have, one cannot but speculate as to the extent to which the results received reflect the relatively close relationship between Swedish and English. Research done by members of the Error Analysis Project at the Department of English at Åbo Akademi has shown that Swedish-speaking learners of English are much helped by positive transfer in the early stages of learning (cf. Palmberg 1979). The effects of positive associative transfer (i.e. transfer resulting from associations from an individual item in the mother tongue) are especially strong in the receptive performances of listening and reading, and particularly so in vocabulary learning (see Ringbom 1976, 1978. For the distinction between item learning and system learning in a foreign language, see Ringbom 1983).

As for reading skills, concrete evidence of formal similarities between Swedish and English words can be found in the vocabulary list compiled by the Finnish National Board of General Education for the Finnish comprehensive school. Of the 1100 English words included in the list, about 400 words are orthographically identical or nearly identical with the

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Swedish equivalents and at the same time share at least one of the meanings of the words. Included in this figure are not only words which are similar in form and in meaning, but also words which are partly similar in meaning. Such "deceptive" words in Swedish and English have — together with words that are similar in form but totally different in meaning — been dealt with e.g. in Ernolv (1958) and in Wikberg (1979).

When it comes to listening skills, the number of words which are similar or almost similar in pronunciation in the two languages is much smaller for reasons having to do with inconsistencies between sounds and symbols in both languages. Thus, depending on how strictly one interprets the criterion "similar or almost similar in pronunciation", up to 100 of the words in the base word-list can be said to satisfy this criterion. Such words are e.g. "ring", "best", and "long".

Of the 40 English words included in the test 15–20 words are similar or almost similar in pronunciation compared with their Swedish equivalents. In TABLE 1 these words have been marked 'E' — as in "easy" in accordance with Lado's distinction between "easy", "neutral" and "difficult" words in vocabulary learning (see Lado 1957:82 ff.). An 'E' within parentheses indicates that there was only partial agreement among the native speakers of Finland-Swedish used as informants as to whether the words are "almost similar in pronunciation" or not. Not surprisingly, the vast majority of the words marked 'E' or '(E)' are found among the top twenty most often correctly identified words in the table. Correspondingly, the two expressions that are almost similar in pronunciation in the two languages ("good night" and "good morning") were familiar to almost all of the pupils (cf. TABLE 2).

In the productive test, where the pupils were requested to write down as many English words as possible and their Swedish equivalents, the pupils produced a total of 866 English word tokens or 246 different words. In addition, they produced 78 words the meanings of which were not clear to them (judged by the fact that they produced the wrong Swedish equivalent or no equivalent at all) and 67 words that could not be identified by the judges (in either language).[5]

In the inventory of 246 different English words thus produced by the pupils, about 75 per cent occurred once or twice. The remaining words, i.e. those that were suggested by at least three pupils at the time of testing, are

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listed in TABLE 3. It must, however, be remembered that it is largely a matter of chance what words are easily available without any stimuli in a test situation of the present kind. The list should therefore be seen only as a very general indicator of the type of English words that were known to the present pupils. In the table the words have been arranged in alphabetical order within each frequency group.

TABLE 3. Words produced in the productive test

Number of pupils producing the word/s	Word/s produced
41–50	one, two
31–40	the numerals from three to ten
21–30	—
16–20	black, horse, you
11–15	eleven, hello, now, the, yes
7–10	milk, moon, no, pig, red, twelve
5– 6	and, ball, book, brown, cold, door, I, ice-cream, king, little, seventeen, sixteen
3– 4	baby, bag, big, bird, boat, cowboy, crazy, fifteen, fish, fourteen, go, good, know, man, mouse, people, please, star, Sweden, thank/s, twenty, woman, yellow, the days of the week

As in the receptive test, the words that the pupils tended to produce referred in various ways to everyday life, including the numerals from one to fifteen (thirteen was an exception), colours, animals, and the days of the week.

Having finished their productive test, the pupils were asked in a questionnaire to tick the appropriate options stating where they (believe they) have learnt the English words they know. The five most popular options were:

1. watching television;
2. listening to music;
3. at home (in general);
4. from friends;
5. travelling.

These options were chosen by 56 (76%), 47 (63%), 44 (59%), 28 (38%) and 21 pupils (28%) respectively. On an average, the pupils ticked 3–4 options each of the 15 options available.

There is no reason to doubt the accuracy of the pupils' own judgements of where they have acquired their English vocabulary. Especially television — their first choice — is an important source of information, in general, and as far as the English language is concerned, it presents Finnish school-children with excellent opportunities of hearing English outside school.

The reason is that, in Finland, foreign films are presented with original sound and provided with subtexts in Finnish or in Swedish. Judging from the fact that about 70 per cent of the foreign films and programmes shown on Finnish television today are British or American — there is at least one English-medium programme every day — the impact of English through television on Finnish school-children must be considered as fairly strong. This influence may well have contributed to the pupils' acquisition of words such as "shoot", "kill" and "hands up" as judged by the results from the receptive test.

Final comments

The purpose of the present study was to get preliminary insights into the English vocabularies of Swedish-speaking pupils at both receptive- and productive-skill levels using the simplest possible testing methods. In doing so, several of the problems involved in the measuring of vocabularies — whether it be in the mother tongue or in a foreign language —could be avoided, including problems such as defining the concept "word", specifying what it means to "know" a word, producing valid samples of words to be tested, accounting for factors like "frequency of occurrence" and "difficulty", etc. (See e.g. the surveys on vocabulary acquisition and/or learning by Meara 1980 and Teichroew 1982.)

Although the present results cannot claim generality in any respect, the relatively good knowledge of English vocabulary demonstrated in the two tests by the pupils suggests that there are pedagogical implications to be drawn from the test results. Especially formal similarities between Swedish

and English words — which at the same time share at least one meaning — seem to facilitate comprehension even for Swedish-speaking pupils who have never studied English, and, if exploited fully by the English teacher, such words will be of great value from the very elementary levels of mastery of the language.

NOTES

1. Paper presented at the 7th World Congress of Applied Linguistics, Brussels, August 5–10, 1984.
2. Exceptions are the schools in the archipelago of Åland (which is governed by a special language law) and a few experimental schools in mainland Finland.
3. The study was carried out as part of a current research programme on foreign-language learning and teaching at the Faculty of Education at Åbo Akademi. The results have been reported on in more detail in an M.Ed. thesis by Mikael Lillqvist (1983).
4. In evaluating the pupils' answers, the judges accepted misspelt words if they were easily identifiable as the wanted target words. Nouns, verbs and adjective forms were accepted for all words where appropriate. For the word "right" the Swedish equivalent for "write" was accepted as well.
5. The pupils' disability to spell English (and to some extent, also Swedish) words correctly created many difficulties for the judges in their evaluation of the pupils' answers. The judges therefore decided to accept the words produced by the pupils only if the produced word could be recognized as an English word either in writing or when pronounced according to Swedish or English rules of pronunciation, and if, at the same time, the Swedish version given could be easily identified as the correct target equivalent.

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